Does Christianity Need the Church?
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
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I begin as positively as possible with good news – very good news. Church is good for you. A Stanford University anthropologist, T.M. Luhrman, has done research on people who attend and belong to churches and people who do not and reported his findings in a New York Times article last April, "The Benefits of Church." Professor Luhrman:

"One of the most striking scientific discoveries about religion in recent years is that going to church weekly is good for you." Attending church regularly apparently boosts the immune system and decreases blood pressure. Luhrman says that going to church regularly may add two to three years to your life.

Think of the marketing potential of that! A large, tastefully designed sign in front of The Georgetown Presbyterian Church: "Attend this church and add three years to your life."

Think of the life-style options. "Work out at your health club, cut back on red meat and fat, eat smart and go to church!" Now, ordinarily when there is a guest preacher and the pastor is not in the pulpit, attendance falls off. So, tomorrow morning, before you select the Washington Post or New York Times, coffee and bagels with cream cheese (Sue and I have discovered that if you slather the toasted bagel with butter and then cream cheese, it tastes very good), before you go down that path instead of coming to church, think about the catastrophic possibilities. Consider yourselves warned.

Professor Luhrman confesses that the reasons why church is good for you are not entirely clear. He speculates that social support is part of it. Church people, he reports, "Really do seem to look out for one another, show up with dinner when friends are sick and sit to talk when they are unhappy." He cites a companion study in North Carolina that found that "frequent churchgoers had large social networks, more contact with, more affection for, and more kinds of social support than their unchurched counterparts." So – attending church, belonging to church, supporting a church is healthy, a lot healthier than not.

And yet something major is happening to the church, something akin to what Carl Sandburg said about the middle of the 19th century in his biography of Abraham Lincoln. "Something was dying and something was being born."

The consistent mantra and lament among us at this point in history is that the church, particularly the mainline church, is declining and in a lot of trouble. "Mainline" here defined as the Colonial Big Three:

Congregationalists (now the United Church of Christ), Episcopalians, and Presbyterians – churches that dominated in American cultural history from the 17th century, pre-colonial days – through the first half of the 20th century. United Methodists, American Baptists, Disciples of Christ and some Lutheran churches are also included in the phrase "mainline." It originated, of course, in the mainline of the old Pennsylvania Railroad running west out of Philadelphia through the old suburbs and communities that were definers of American culture for decades. In any event, Mainline Churches seem to be in a lot of trouble, in fact, seem not to be "mainline" at all any more. Someone suggested that "sideline" is more accurate.

Frederick Buechner, novelist and Presbyterian minister whose books have been a companion, inspiration, and resource for me and many of us for the past 40 years, once said that maybe the best thing that could happen to the church would be for it all to be washed away in a great tidal wave – all the church buildings and pews and pulpits, all the hymnals and prayerbooks and Books of Order, all the committee reports and resolutions and overtures – all of it tumbling over and over, washed away. And when it is all gone, Buechner said, all we would have left is Christ – and one another – which is all we had in the beginning.

Frankly, some days it feels like that is exactly what is happening to us, a tidal wave of history, threatening to wash it all away.

When I was ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament in 1963, the Presbyterian Church was 3.5 million strong and growing. We were there from the beginning and before. In the pre-Revolutionary colonies, we were one of three major churches that came along with early settlers: Puritan Congregationalists, Anglican-Episcopalians, and Scotch-Irish Presbyterians. There are Presbyterian churches not far from here that are a century older than the nation. When the Continental Congress declared independence, one of ours, John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister and president of the College of New Jersey at Princeton, was the only clergyman to sign it. Benjamin Rush was one of ours, and James Madison, Jefferson's disciple, was heavily influenced by his professor and mentor, John Witherspoon. When the new congress met to write a Constitution for the new republic in Philadelphia, Presbyterians were holding their first national meeting, a General Assembly, across town. Presbyterians are rightfully proud that the Founders' political thinking was influenced not only by Enlightenment philosophers like John Locke, but also by the radical political implications of Calvinism: namely that each individual, created in the image of God has value, dignity and rights, that political authority originates, not hierarchically, with King and Pope, but with the people, that power in the civil arena and in the church begins with the people who then, in their God-given liberty, confer it on those they choose to govern. It is no accident therefore, that the system of government they came up with in 1787 in Philadelphia looks remarkably like the structure of the Presbyterian Church,

with local, regional and national bodies whose members are elected by the people, and with careful – imperfect, to be sure, and always in need of protecting – but carefully, intentional attention to the rights of the individual.

Presbyterians, because of their confidence in the God-given potential of the individual, led the way in establishing institutions of education, public education, the crown jewel of the Scottish Reformation two centuries earlier. The first thing Presbyterians did after establishing a new church on the frontier was organize a school, a college, a theological seminary. Princeton, Lafayette, W&J, Davidson, Wooster. There are still 70 or so colleges and universities related to the church – Agnes Scott, Carrol, Davidson, Hampden-Sydney, McCalester, Sterling, Stillman, Whitworth.

Presbyterians were out-evangelized by Methodists and Baptists as the American frontier expanded westward for the simple reason that Presbyterians have always insisted on an educated ministry, requiring years of higher education. The source of most Presbyterian clergy was Great Britain – Scotland, and there simply weren't enough of them to keep up. The Methodists and Baptists were not so fastidious and sent ministers to the west who could ride a horse and read.

By the 1960s, when I came of age ecclesiastically, we were at the top of our game. We had consolidated our national organization and mission and educational program with a national headquarters, built a wonderful new office building at 475 Riverside Drive in Manhattan, just like IBM. President Eisenhower, who was baptized a Presbyterian while in office, helped dedicate the Inter Church Center, 475, what we affectionately called "the Vatican on the Hudson," and our highest officer, Stated Clerk Eugene Carson Blake, was on the cover of Time magazine. I loved it.

My first job was as a New Church Development Pastor. The Presbyterian Church was planting churches in the growing suburbs. We were one of six new churches in NW Indiana alone.

And then something happened. What it was exactly has been and still is the subject of endless study, analysis and relentless search for a villain, someone or something to blame.

The Presbyterian Church has always seen as part of its mission to be deeply involved in the life of the community and nation, just as John Calvin's Reformed Church was involved in the political, social and economic life of 16th century Geneva. We've spoken our mind on the major issues of the day in every age: in our time, on issues of justice, race, stewardship of the environment. Some conclude that what happened to us was that the church got too far ahead of its members who began to quit because they disagreed with what the church was saying and doing. Anecdotally, that is true – on occasion. People became angry and did quit when the church contributed

$10,000 to the legal defense fund for a young African American academic, Angela Davis, who was accused of murder. People became angry, including my father, when Stated Clerk Eugene Carson Blake was arrested in a demonstration at a Baltimore Amusement Park and photographed, in his clerical collar, being escorted into a paddy wagon by police. It's a well-worn argument and analysis that once again appeared a few months ago in a book review in the Wall Street Journal, written by a well-known right wing hit man who repeated the old accusation that mainline churches are losing members because of their political proclivities.

The truth is, the argument doesn't hold. Study after study has failed to produce evidence that church membership decline was caused by anger over the church's progressive political stances.

We leveled off and began to decline numerically just about the time I was ordained. We have dropped from a national membership of 3.6 million to just under 2 million today.

There is an entire library of literature analyzing the phenomenon.

Here are a few of my insights for what they are worth:

The first is demographic: Churches grow when their members more than replace themselves by birth. The birth rate in Mainline Churches dipped below 2 a few decades ago. Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Episcopalians were not having enough babies. Catholics, Mormons, Southern Baptists were and are. Although it has just begun to happen to the Southern Baptists as well. So – get busy! By the way, Sue and I have done our part – 5 children, 5 Presbyterians – with 13 grandchildren right behind them.

The second is about real estate and community change. We have a lot of churches in places where they needed to be in the past, but no longer are; in urban and rural neighborhoods that have changed dramatically in the past 40 years. My hometown of Altoona, Pennsylvania, a thriving Pennsylvania Railroad town of 85,000 in the 1940s and 50s, had 7 Presbyterian churches, all of them viable and vital. The railroad collapsed, the shops closed, population fell to 50,000 and is still falling, and 4 of the 7 Presbyterian churches closed.

The pattern is consistent in every city. Once thriving churches of 3 to 4 to 500, with a solid Sunday School, regular infant baptisms and weddings, saw their neighborhoods change and decline. Today there are 75 members, most of them elderly, the building needs a new furnace and a new roof, there are no children and no baptisms.

They are precious communities, but they can't raise enough money to keep the building in repair and pay the Presbyterian minimum salary, so they get by with a stated supply pastor, or part-time pastor.

Our very strength exacerbates the problem. We are an orderly church with a strong emphasis on participatory decision-making. We are not nimble, to say the least. We can't close or merge these churches without a process that takes years, literally. We can't start a new church without forming a committee to study the issue, another committee to do a "needs analysis," another committee to determine "financial viability." Willow Creek, a mega church in a Chicago suburb, and a good one, can start a new church, hire a pastor, rent a hall and open for business in the same time it takes Chicago Presbytery to organize a nominating committee to nominate members for the planning committee to explore the possibilities and do a demographic study.

I mean no disrespect. It's simply the way it is. And it needs to be said here that the national church has launched a creative new initiative to fund 1,001 new worshipping communities, without the policies and accoutrements that accompany the planting of a New Church Development. There are more than 100 of these new communities up and running, some with part-time clergy help, some entirely laity-led (a little like the new Testament church!)

There are thriving, growing Presbyterian churches, plenty of them, and this, obviously, is one of them. And I will talk later about the special responsibility that resides with these churches.

In the meantime we are caught not only in the sociological and ecclesiastical "perfect storm," but in a culture that is undergoing a vast transformation. We are becoming a secular culture, more secular than at any time in our history. It's not necessarily a bad thing, but it is a new thing. Evidence is all around us. Sunday, the Lord's Day, for instance, used to belong to us. No longer.

I worked for 26 years in a church located on Michigan Avenue, Chicago, called the Magnificent Mile, surrounded on all four sides by high end hotels, Four Seasons, Ritz Carlton, Westin, restaurants, vertical shopping malls, Bloomingdale's, Macy's a block away, Tiffany and Victoria's Secret. Sunday is one of the busiest days of the week. In Altoona, in the 1950s, nothing was open, not even gas stations. I found myself at home with an unplanned Sunday off once and decided to ride my bike up the lake front bike path. It was an important learning experience. The place was crowded: bikers, joggers, walkers, the beaches packed, softball, volleyball, soccer leagues in full operation, picnic tables, families, the wonderful aroma of meat on a charcoal grill. I had to remind myself that it was Sunday morning. This used to be our time, about which poet Wallace Stevens described a "holy hush." When I have the occasion to talk to new ministers coming to Chicago, I

recommend that they do it – ride a bike or walk on the lake front on Sunday morning, see where all the people are and what they are doing, experience how pleasant a Sunday morning is, and what we are up against when we open our doors at the 11:00 a.m. sacred hour and expect people to come.

What happened to Sunday is, of course, just the tip of the iceberg, a symptom of what is happening, widely and broadly in American culture.

A Canadian theologian, Douglas John Hall, long-time professor at McGill University, prolific thinker and writer, is helpful in describing what has happened to us as "Disestablishment" Mainline Christianity and Christian Churches in North America, Hall maintains, have been supported, propped up and virtually sponsored by custom, convention and sometimes law – every bit as substantially as the older, actually established churches of Great Britain and Europe. All of that is gone now, in the face of the racial and religious diversity of the culture, the new socially and politically viable secularism. It is now ok politically to be a Roman Catholic – unthinkable until JFK, a Jew, a Mormon, or a "none" – the fastest growing cohort on the religious landscape. Hall proposes that it is a good and healthy thing. In his very thoughtful book, *The End of Christendom and The Future of Christianity*, Hall proposes that Christian Churches are free in a new way to be the church, authentically, and that people who continue to come to church are doing so for the right reasons.

Hall thinks that "denominational" religion is already in a lot of trouble. He writes, "It is entirely possible that most of the once powerful ecclesiastical institutions of North America will disappear entirely within the near future." [*Waiting for Gospel: An Appeal to the Dispirited Remnants of Protestant Establishment*]

I don't think denominations are about to disappear, but they/we are already changing. The Corporate model, with a corporate headquarters, field offices and staff, mission planned and carried out top down, funded by local outlets that send money into the national to do mission on their behalf, has served us very well. But it is over. It doesn't work any longer. Mission is now local. Congregations want to do mission on their own and are doing at admirably. But money now stays home, not entirely, but significantly. Consequently, a national staff that once numbered 700 is now down to around 300. And headquarters, in Louisville, Ky, is in a building appropriate for a 4 million member denomination is now half empty.

Walter Brueggemann, one of our best and most articulate scholars and prophetic voices says that the old mainlines churches are in a kind of "cultural exile," no longer at the center of the action, but out on the edge. Brueggemann reminds us that when Israel was in exile it wasn't particularly fun, but it was creative. Some of the best thinking and most sublime literature comes from the time just before, during and immediately after

Israel's exile in Babylon for 70 years. Exile is not necessarily a bad place to be, he reminds us.

One of the most refreshing analyses and metaphors comes from scholar Phyllis Tickle. In her important book, *The Great Emergence*, she observed that every 500 years or so the church holds the equivalent of a giant rummage sale. Obsolete, out of date, worn out stuff is sold to make way for new, better stuff. She argues that it has happened all the way back to the Exodus, when Moses led Hebrew slaves to freedom in their promised land, to the monarchy of King David and the building of the Jerusalem Temple, to the Babylonian Exile – big things happen in our history every 500 years or so. Jesus and the New Testament. Gregory the Great and the Papacy, the split between the Western Church in Rome, and the Eastern Church – Constantinople, the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago. Every 500 years several things happen: there is a split, an offshoot from the mainstream: experienced as a tragedy at the time (maybe even fatal), and a new thing emerges, a new, vigorous, energetic institutional expression of the original, organizing idea. And then the older, established institution renews, reenergizes itself and becomes a stronger, better form of the original. The two now move into the future, on separate trajectories - with more integrity and energy and faithfulness: Roman Christianity and Eastern Orthodox Christianity: Roman Catholicism and Protestantism.

That helps me. God knows I lament my denomination's numerical decline and no one has fallen further than the Presbyterians unless it is the Congregationalists. We used to make news. When our Stated Clark, Eugene Carson Blake and Episcopal Bishop James Pike issued an ecumenical challenge to their churches it was front page news in all the major newspapers. I was reading the Time 50th anniversary issue of the March on Washington and Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech and in the first set of pictures, King in the March itself, there he was – arm in arm with King, Eugene Carson Blake, in his signature clergy collar and jaunty straw hat, Eugene Carson Blake, Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church. That was the Church I was ordained into. I was proud of it and loved it.

How things have changed. With 8 million other Americans I watched the final episode of Downton Abbey, as that magical, mythical era in British history began to crumble and shake and change. And it occurred to me that, in a way, it mirrors my experience with the Presbyterian Church: Downton Abbey as a metaphor for Mainline American Christianity, Empire and privilege, a feudal style of agriculture evolving, women finding their voice – Lord Crawley, objecting, pushing back, dragging his feet – like men I knew, like me at times, I confess.

Recently, however, an interesting thing is happening, a reexamination and reanalysis of the narrative of decline and despair about Mainline Christianity. It began with the publication of a new book by Robert Putnam

and David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. Putnam is a Harvard sociologist who caught everybody's attention a while ago with an essay, "Bowling Alone," an attempt to explain the decline of public community sensibilities and organizations. Putnam discovered that all voluntary public organizations were experiencing numerical decline, political parties, neighborhood associations, Rotary, Lions Club, even the venerable PTA. When he turned to recreation he discovered an intriguing phenomenon. There were fewer bowling leagues, as he expected, but the number of individuals who bowled had increased. People were "bowling alone" apparently. American culture was experiencing a loss of "public capital" – people were staying home, watching TV instead of joining neighbors in some common activity.

Putnam teamed up with a Notre Dame scholar, David Campbell, to do an analysis of what actually was happening to religious institutions based on an exhaustive national opinion poll. The result is a fascinating and important book.

The author began with the 1960s, a major sea change in American culture that had a major impact on mainline religion. The sexual revolution, drugs, the anti-war movement, student protests, civil rights movement, feminism, bumper stickers that said "Make Love Not War" and "Question Authority." It seemed that everything traditional, conventional, certain and safe suddenly came loose.

And so Putnam and Campbell say, there was a reaction, a counter movement, led by evangelical Christians like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, a full scale defense of traditional values – called Family Values and beliefs. The movement took hold immediately. Suddenly reporters were talking to Falwell and Robertson instead of the Presbyterian State Clerk and Episcopal Bishop. The political right sensed the enormous political potential and jumped all over it, co-opted it and the result was the "Moral Majority," an energized political conservatism fueled by traditional Christian language and Christian leaders.

Some of the rhetoric became strident, harsh, outright mean. Falwell and Roberts declared that natural disasters and military threats were acts of God, punishing America for abortion, gay rights, and feminism. The political right tired of it, was embarrassed by it and backed away and so, Putnam and Campbell discovered did thousands and thousands of young adults, turned off by its narrow moral positions and its obsession with sex – feminism, homosexuality. Young adults abandoned the churches in droves because of what they were seeing and hearing about religion from the evangelical right.

That is where we are today: according to Putnam and Campbell. And I propose that it is not a bad place at all for the mainline churches.

At some point you have to ask if any of this matters. Is church all that important? Does Christianity need the church.… The current popular, cultural attitude is probably not. People are not only bowling alone, American culture, since the 1980s, has become radically individualistic, marked and oriented with personal preference and choice the ultimate criteria. “I’m spiritual, not religious,” young couples tell the pastor when they have come to be married. “I believe in God. I try to be a good person. I meditate and journal. I just can’t see the point of the church, not to mention all the stuff I read about anti-gay rhetoric and rules and policies that exclude some of my friends, and priests abusing children.…”

Does Christianity Need the Church? Let me say an unqualified yes. The entire history of our faith is the story of God acting in human history and creating a people, a community. Israel’s Ten Commandments, are equally divided between proper relationship with God and proper relationship with other people, the community. Judaism is a communal religion and so is Christianity, Judaism’s outgrowth, its child.

Jesus called individuals to follow him, and formed them into a community. He spent a lot of time in the communal structures of his religion, synagogues and Temple. And the night before he died, he told them that they needed one another, that the unity, their community, their communion, would be how the world would know about him. “Love one another,” he said, and it was just as important as the ancient mandate to love God with heart, soul, strength, and mind.

Sometimes people ask if Jesus really meant to start an institution. And when my patience with the institutional church grows thin, I ask it too. Did he really mean this? The Presbyterian Church, the Vatican, the Pope, the Presbytery? The answer is that Jesus clearly intended to leave behind a community of followers who, together, would embody the good news of God’s love, just as he did, would love one another so conspicuously, would love the world with the same passion he did, that people would see in them, in their community, something of the truth about God and God’s love.

My hope for our future is that we hold on to our best and noblest mainline and Presbyterian traditions for dear life.

My hope is that the church, specifically our Presbyterian church will remember and be grateful that this liberal, republican democracy of ours is based directly on our values, our anthropology, our sense of moral responsibility and accountability…beginning with the innate dignity and worth of the individual. It’s in our oldest stories: human beings created in the image of God, all of them, male and female, and endowed by God with responsibility for creation. I do not think that idea will die if there are no Presbyterian churches, but I do think it is important to remember that they are our ideas, and that our ancestors built them into western culture and

institutions. And I do feel a little more optimistic about our culture if there are mainline congregations in it.

And that central idea that honest faith always seeks understanding: that truth is in order to goodness: that the pursuit of truth, the free pursuit of truth, is the human vocation, part of what it means to love God with one's mind, and that faith need never fear science and vigorous intellectual inquiry. Our culture does need, desperately I believe, the reminder and example of a religion that seeks to be intellectually responsible and is never opposed to or afraid of reason and truth.

And the culture needs a religion that remembers and celebrates its long affiliation with art, in fact its inspiration of the most sublime art the race has created, that respects and nurtures the expression of our most precious ideas not only in words, but also in images and music and dance and poetry and drama.

And the culture needs religion that directs human attention away from itself, a public liturgy that leads human consciousness away from narcissism and the radically individualistic, market-driven focus on me, my experience, my needs, my feelings, to an awareness of the mysterious, the ineffable, the wholly otherness of God.

And the culture needs a religion that takes the incarnation seriously, an incarnational church that seeks to love and serve the world unabashedly and unapologetically, a church driven not by growth strategies, in fear of the future, but by the example of the one who loved the world so much that he died for it.

A church like that, I believe, I know, will be interesting, will be compelling, in its faithfulness, integrity, openness, and love for the world.

Something is emerging and no one knows what it will look like. But there is growing consensus and evidence that it will be ecumenical, newly ecumenical, willing to leave the safety of precious tradition, open to the truth others have discovered, other Christians, evangelical, liberal, Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal, and other faith traditions, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu.

It will be open hearted and inclusive, willing to leave behind the safety of old exclusivisms, theological, social and moral. The world is already doing that. Young adults don't care much about the issues we have been fighting about: issues of who's in and who's out. When my children hear me talk about the most recent conflict in the church about ordaining gay and lesbian Presbyterians or gay marriage, they say, "Dad – are you still talking about that?"

And it will be missional. It will attempt to be the body of Christ in the world, literally. Every congregation will begin, not with "What is our growth plan, our institutional survival strategy?" but with the simple question: "What does God want us to be doing in the world in the name of Jesus Christ?"

Robert Frost said that he had a lover's quarrel with the world. Anyone who spends much time in the church has a lover's quarrel with it. I do. I am as impatient as anyone with the church's slowness, its bureaucracy, its disobedience. But I remain high on the church, for all the reasons I have been trying to explain. For another thing, I'm high on the church because it is not ours, it's God's: it's not even our idea; it's God's idea.

And, finally, I'm high on the church because of my own experience. Let me conclude with two anecdotes. The first is from my experience as Moderator of our General Assembly, representing the PCUSA to the global church. Moderators are sent wherever our global mission partners need to hear from us, need encouragement, need to know that American Presbyterians know about them, care about them, are praying for them. The shooting had just stopped in the Balkans, the ghastly massacres, ethnic cleansing, Sarajevo, Bosnian Muslims, Serbian Orthodox, Croatian Catholics had been at war for years. In Croatia there is a tiny, faithful Reformed Church. It has been there since the Reformation. Sue and I were sent to bring greetings from the PCUSA, to show concern and offer encouragement. We slept in a hotel in Osijek, with bullet holes in the façade, in a bed slightly larger than a standard twin bed. We visited Presbyterian mission volunteers in a hospital that cared for children who had limbs blown off by the thousands of land mines left behind. We helped serve food to hungry Muslim refugees. I spoke with the RC Bishop, who told me how awful the Serbian Orthodox were. I spoke with Serbian Orthodox Christians who blamed everything on the Roman Catholics. I talked with Croatian Christians who patiently explained that Bosnian Muslims were shiftless, dirty, and had an obvious genetic deficit. And I met one of the most unforgettable characters I have ever encountered. Antol Bolog, a Serbian businessman, who had a conversion experience and decided to give his life to the healing and restoration of the battered people all round him. He went to work for the Croatian Reformed Church's Agape Project, funded in part by the PCUSA One Great Hour of Sharing. Agape had taken on the responsibility of helping rebuild Muslim villages destroyed by Serbian troops as they retreated. Antol's job was to assemble raw materials, beg, borrowed or stolen and, as a last resort, paid for: the labor, volunteer and hired, and supervise the work.

On one occasion he was meeting with the Chief of a Muslim village that had been completely destroyed, leveled. They were looking at the plot plans laid out on a large table, examining each dwelling, each structure. When they came to the plans for a mosque, the Muslim leader expressed surprise. "Why," he asked Antol, are you Christians going to build a Muslim mosque?

You have been trying to convert us for a thousand years. Why are you rebuilding our house of worship?"

Antol responded, "We are going to rebuild your mosque because we follow a man who told a story about a man who was attacked by robbers, beaten and left for dead beside the road. A man came along, stopped, didn't ask about his religion, didn't try to convert him, just knelt by the side of the road, bound up the man's wounds and got him on his feet again.

That is why we Christians, the Christian Church, will rebuild your mosque.

A simple story: an isolated incident, but it continues to happen with enough frequency to give me hope for the church and confidence in the church's future.

Christianity needs the church: a community of people who know about the love of God in Jesus Christ and who strive together to be the Body of Christ in the world, to do the things he did, to say the things he said, to go to the places he went.

I was a parish pastor – a church pastor for fifty years and I have witnessed church being church, being the "Beloved Community," the Body of Christ in many way that make me humble and deeply, profoundly gratified.

I like to remember Glen Fenema when I find myself wondering about the future of the church.

Glen had AIDS. He grew up in and was a very active member of a church that was vocal about its disapproval of his sexual orientation. He found us through a friend, started attending and joined and literally threw himself into the life of the community that did not reject him because of who he was.

Glen volunteered for mission projects, signed up for a mission trip and never missed worship. His parents, life-long members of their family church, began to attend with him and eventually became members with him.

As his illness advanced, Glen could not always make it to worship on Sunday morning. We signed him up for the CD ministry that delivered the recorded service to his home.

Near the end he was in a hospice facility. On my last visit we talked with more depth and honesty than ever. We talked about his life, his faith. We talked about his dying.

I asked him, what was the hardest part. He told me the hardest part was at night, trying to fall asleep. He was so sick, and at night when all the guests had gone home, and the lights were down, and things were quiet – he was

alone with his pain and illness – and the awareness that he was dying. “That’s very hard,” he said.

“You know what I do?” he said. I turn on my CD player, and put on my headphones, and listen to the Sunday service at church. I must have a hundred of them. It settles me down. Sometimes I fall asleep right away, during the prelude. I often fall asleep during your sermon (I’m not the only one to do that.”

“But almost every night I fall asleep like that, here in my bed, but also in my church.”

And that is why, in spite of everything to the contrary, I remain high on God’s church, the Church of Jesus Christ.

Does Christianity need the church? As a matter of fact: yes, yes it does.